

27 March 1986

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 4D

# Military, activists search for grounds to verify stories of deserters in Asia

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

They went by colorful nicknames like "Buller" and "Pork Chop" and have equally colorful — though perhaps partly apocryphal — histories.

They left the military in Vietnam because they were in trouble with the law, because of narcotics addictions, because of ideology or because they wanted to be with their Asian wives.

Deserters, and others who stayed by choice, account for many of 112 unresolved sightings of American servicemen in Southeast Asia, according to many observers.

Take, for example, the story of Marine Pfc. Earl C. Weatherman.

In September 1967, Pfc. Weatherman was in the brig at the U.S. air base in Da Nang, South Vietnam, having slugged an officer in an argument over his Vietnamese girlfriend. The armed forces tried to dissuade their men from having Vietnamese girlfriends, but the Marine guarding Pfc. Weatherman had one, too, and helped him escape.

"Not really a troublemaker, but a smart ass," was how a Defense Intelligence Agency analyst summed up Pfc. Weatherman, who ended up in the hands of the Viet Cong, the communist insurgents who helped North Vietnam topple the U.S.-backed South Vietnam government.

According to Pentagon records, to Vietnam veterans and to the DIA, 2,436 servicemen were reputed to have been in Southeast Asia after the war's end, some missing in action, some prisoners of war, some deserters. Amid recently redoubled efforts to resolve the cases, there is the likelihood that some do not, or did not, want to come back.

"Some of them [deserters] were terribly wanted men," said Pelvo White Jr., a District man who served as a medical supply officer in Da Nang and Saigon in 1972 and 1973. "They were wanted for selling military equipment to the enemy, for assaulting or killing an officer, for collaborating with the enemy."

Many deserters came back during the waning months of the war.

"It certainly wasn't the number of men who were out there in Saigon," said Mr. White. He saw deserters addicted to inexpensive heroin turn themselves in at the 3rd Field Hospital in Saigon, where he was stationed. "Some escaped from there because they couldn't stand the detoxification process. Some ran back into the city to get their drugs."

Mr. White thinks some men are still being held against their will but that most are in hiding.

The DIA analyst said as many as 40 missing soldiers are deserters. "I would suggest all but a tiny fraction would be held against their will," said retired Lt. Gen. Eugene Tighe, a former DIA director. "There's a lot of ways to convince someone he's a deserter. Brainwashing, for one."

Lt. Gen. Leonard Perroots, the current DIA director, told the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Asian and Pacific affairs that two of 16 reported sightings of Americans in the last six years involve men who opted to remain in Vietnam after the war.

Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard L. Armitage said the Pentagon is anxious to close the books on these cases. "We do not know conditions under which any Americans may be living in Vietnam and, frankly, that's not so important to us," he said in a televised interview this month. "We just want to resolve the issue. We're not interested in forcing Americans to return if they should exist and do not want to come back."

Between 1965 and 1970, desertion rates in Vietnam averaged 5 per 1,000 soldiers, according to figures published by the Pentagon in 1973. But conflicting reports, a sparsity of information and the passage of more than a decade have clouded the picture.

Reports on Pfc. Weatherman, for example, did not end with his apparent capture by the Viet Cong in 1967. According to "The Survivors," the narrative of nine former POWs, Pfc. Weatherman was killed in April 1968 by montagnards — Vietnamese warlords — following his attempt to escape from a Viet Cong prison camp.

But Robert Garwood, a former

Marine private who returned to the United States in 1979 and was court-martialed for collaborating with the Vietnamese, told a different story. He was in that prison camp, according to an account he gave to Michael Van Atta, an activist Vietnam veteran living in Vienna, Va. The Vietnamese staged a mock execution of Pfc. Weatherman to frighten the prisoners into submission, Mr. Garwood said. He was ordered to bury Pfc. Weatherman, but the coffin was empty.

The DIA analyst confirmed the mock execution and quoted Mr. Garwood as saying he last saw Pfc. Weatherman in 1977 in North Vietnam. Other intelligence reports indicate that Pfc. Weatherman may have accompanied a Vietnamese delegation in 1977 to Moscow, Havana and Warsaw, the analyst said.

Pfc. Weatherman, whose story is unusually well-documented, is among more than half a dozen alleged deserters known by name or nickname. They include:

- McKinley Nolan, who disappeared from the First Infantry Division on Nov. 9, 1967. Four months later he was delivering anti-American propaganda broadcasts for the Viet Cong and Radio Hanoi.

"Most of what he did propagandawise was targeted towards other blacks in Vietnam," said the DIA analyst, citing transmissions intercepted by the CIA.

Intelligence reports provided by Asian refugees in early 1974 say Mr. Nolan, using the nickname "Buller," left the Viet Cong and lived at two sites with Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, possibly with another American serviceman.

- Petty Officer 2nd Class Louis La Porte, a Navy medic who parachuted into "Happy Valley" near Da Nang at 4 a.m. on Sept. 5, 1967, with a Marine patrol searching for enemy rockets.

When the patrol hit the ground, they immediately were fired upon. Mr. La Porte, who had become separated from the group during the

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jump, could not be found. But when the Marines returned to base, they discovered a note from Mr. La Porte saying he knew he would not return. They concluded it was he who had fired upon them.

Later reports put Mr. La Porte in a Saigon prison camp with Mr. Garwood in 1970 and at a commune near Hanoi in 1975. He is listed as killed in action, and his name appears on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

- "Pork Chop," a deserter so named because of his mutton-chop sideburns, who worked for the Viet Cong and is credited with stealing two armored personnel carriers from a South Vietnamese army camp. "He did this basically by chaining one behind the other and driving off," the DIA analyst said.

- "Nam," an American soldier described on one of 5,000 pages of declassified Pentagon intelligence reports released in 1978. "The American spoke Vietnamese and told the NVA [North Vietnamese army] troops in the village that he was from California and had no intention of returning to the U.S. after the war," the report said.

- "Salt and Pepper," two American servicemen, black and white, and "Tex," all said to have worked for the Viet Cong.

J. Thomas Burch, the head of the 200,000-member National Vietnam Veterans Coalition, said real POWs are unjustly lumped with the few deserters alive in Southeast Asia. "It's our concern they will use this device to negotiate with the communists and bring people home who are not really deserters, but label them deserters to get them out," Mr. Burch said.

Across the spectrum of opinion, observers agree it is all-important to bring deserters or collaborators home because, like Mr. Garwood, they may have first-hand information of others listed as missing.

"If they're there, they've seen other Americans and they can tell us about them," said Mr. Van Atta, the activist Vietnam veteran.

Added Mr. Tighe, the former DIA director: "Regardless of who they are, I want them back on American soil."